

Va'Yeilech – 5782

Last Monday, standing on the bima at different times during our services for the first day of Rosh Hashana, I looked at the sanctuary and I was immediately transported back to a much earlier time when there were extra rows in the back and in the front and chairs on one side of the aisle needed to accommodate the crowds that we always had. I can still see windows that used to pull down to open up and let a breath of fresh air because it was Yontiff and it was September and it was NEVER EVER cold, only sweltering. I could see myself sneaking out to go downstairs and run around with my friends when younger and sneaking out to run to the Rex Stimers arena to watch the Chicago Black Hawks warming up for the hockey season ahead. Inevitably, I can see my Zayde and Bubbe sitting in their respective spots in the sanctuary, he in the corner right by the window with his dark sunglasses on and she upstairs next to the pillar on the right with her mink stoll even though it was sweltering outside. On the same bench where Harold and Marcia sit every week, I can see Benny Devore, probably much shorter in old age than in his prime but standing and trying to blow the shofar, sometimes only after much effort to get just the right notes.

Note that I referred to notes because the text of our machzors, the same texts and rituals passed down for centuries, dictate the exact notes and their sequences. The notes obviously refer to music and it is the music that so often is the soundtrack of our lives, whether as Jews or as Canadians. I have a playlist created over a long period of time that now is only one of my Apple Music playlists and so many of those songs bring back very specific memories of episodes in my life, some good, some bad, but most spanning back not years but decades. Music does that to us. It conjures up emotions

that trigger memories that take us backwards in time. Music is comforting usually because it transports us out of our daily reality to another time and place and it is that which comforts us. So often, when the children and grandchildren of our fellow congregants return for a lifecycle event which could be a happy thing like a Bar or Bat Mitzvah or a sad thing like a time of loss, they can be seen and heard singing along with the rest of the congregation. The melodies we hear and the participate in often mindlessly, make us stop and think and bask in happier times.

In our tradition, music links us to the past and the future, as a community, as families, and as individuals. We participate in singing as a way of asserting our membership in the Jewish people and our membership in that peoplehood. I have seldom led a service in the home of a mourning family, whether staunch shul goers or only marginally attached, where everyone knows not just the words but the melody of the Shema or the Ashrei or the Aleynu. In shul, over all my years as gabbai and since, never was there a time when half-empty or overflowing, the sanctuary did not vibrate with the voices of the congregation singing all through the services for the taking out and the return of the Torah to the Aron HaKodesh. The music of our services enables us to participate and remember who we are and what HaShem expects of us. If we were not sure, we would have blotted out the melodies long ago, but they lurk in our memories for a reason.

“Therefore, write down this poem and teach it to the people of Israel; put it in their mouths, in order that this poem may be my witness against the people of Israel.....since it will never be lost from the mouth of their offspring. So, the text in today’s Torah parsha says as it completes the last of the 613 commandments and the rabbis point out while the poem specifically refers to the closing words of Moses as we complete his five

books it actually alludes to the entire story, the musical score of the story of the Children of Israel, the Chosen People. They are commanded to read the poem every seven years which became eventually all the way through every year and not read but SUNG using specific notes for centuries now. If someone from the Middle Ages could go back to the future, they would hear the Torah read exactly the same way, as we would say, back in the day.

The text goes on command that everyone, young and old, rich and poor, hear and participate. This knowledge was not meant to be the preserve of a special group of men, like the monks in early Christendom, who knew how to read and write. Jewish education was for everyone, although truthfully, we have to acknowledge that at one time, this was gender-based, but over the centuries, there were always women who also knew and studied. Furthermore, it was part of the commandment to read and STUDY, to understand what we are meant to do and how we are meant to behave relative to one another and relative to our creator.

This ethos, this compulsion, to hear, to learn, to study not just when young but all one's life, the ethos of lifelong learning is perhaps the greatest gift of our people to the world around us. It is not hard to understand the link between this life-long education and the success of our peoplehood, our longevity as a faith, a culture, and a nation. When we sing together, we become one, we converse with the divine, we raise our voices in song in pride of who we are and what our place in this world is meant to be. Shabbat shalom.